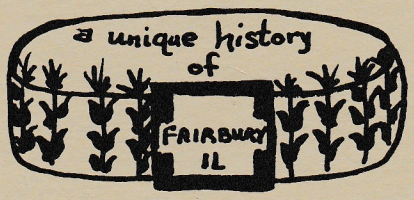
FAIRBURY ECHOES

PRESENTS

BUCKLE ON THE CORNBELT



by

Alma Lewis - James

This booklet is dedicated
in memory of
HENRY W. PHILLIPS.
Mr. Phillips was a Fairbury
attorney from 1949 to 1994,
and a loyal benefactor of
Fairbury Echoes Museum.
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BUCKLE ON THE CORN BELT

BY Alma Lewis-James 1952

INFANT FAIRBURY FOUNDED IN FEUD, FIRE AND FACTIONS

(The Blade this week begins what it believes readers will find to be a delightfully warm and human story concerning the early history of our town. Written by Alma Lewis-James, author of "Boney's Hired Man", and other publications in the fields of both fact and fiction. The story "Buckle On The Corn Belt" will appear in serial form through subsequent issues of the Blade.)

FOREWORD

(This little account of early Fairbury is in no way intended as a serious study. The tales it contains were gathered solely for pleasure, and were meant to show that, if parents are people, so were their grandparents, and their fathers and mothers before them. They were real. They hustled for a living, and had their fun and their troubles. I leave my story there.

Anyone desiring to ascertain what man was candidate for a political office, or how many tons of coal were mined in a given year, is respectfully referred to any one of the three histories of Livingston County. The title to my story was given by Dr. Charles Davies, the much loved pastor of the Fairbury Presbyterian Church for nearly fifty years. A native of Philadelphia, upon his visits home he was so enthusiastic about the new country and the corn it grew, that his sister was moved to remark: "Yes, Charles, it truly must be a wonderful country; and I am quite sure that Fairbury must be the "Buckle on the Corn Belt." - Alma Lewis-James.)

INSTALLMENT NO. 1

In the period immediately following the Civil War the village of Fairbury, Illinois, held the dubious distinction of being one place where no Company would insure any property.
The town was riddled by factions. The citizenry took sides on every conceivable subject. Not only did the partisanship of the War still flame, but the saloon crowd was against the drys; the townspeople against the farmers and the railroad men; the Republicans against the Democrats; Catholics against Protestants. The latter were themselves divided into Methodists, Presbyterians and "Hardshell Baptists", and each of them were prepared to instantly defend their differences of creed against outsiders. But the feud that completely split the town, regardless of sex, age, religion or political belief, stemmed from a private quarrel between two brothers-in-law, and progressed to the point where the whole of Fairbury was involved, and each faction earnestly tried to burn down the town.
In sober fact, Fairbury, almost from its inception, was founded in feud.

OUT OF THE SWAMPS.

Caleb Patton owned a farm where the east part of Fairbury now stands. It was out in the middle of nowhere in the swamps of the prairie. The grass grew taller than a horse's back, and mud was thick and deep. Wheat for the scanty sprinkling of settlers was ground into flour at Ottawa; their grain had to be hauled to Chicago to be sold, and for some time their mail, if any, could be called for at Bloomington. Anything faintly resembling a settlement was at Avoca, on the banks of the Vermilion River, five miles north.

When Patton heard that the builders of the new Peoria and Oquawka railroad (later to become the Toledo, Peoria and Warsaw,) were headed in his direction, he hunted up the Chief Construction Engineer, Octave Chanute, and made him a little dicker; if Chanute would influence the stockholders in his railroad to run the line through Patton's farm, he would give him half of the town. Chanute agreed, and swung his end of the deal. Patton happily laid his farm out into plots, presenting four to his Baptist Church, and another suitable space to the railroad for a depot; and then, for some obscure but hopeful reason, he named that chunk of wilderness "Fairbury".

DEATH OF AVOCA.

The response to his invitation to buy lots was immediate. The inhabitants of Avoca foresaw their death sentence in having been by-passed, and began hauling away their houses on wagons to the new site before the tracks reached there.

They made a very small cluster of houses, but it was a cluster, just the same, what with new ones a-building, and there was a city limits to the thing. So, in a short time when Chanute's construction gang reached there, he was met by a delegation of Founding Fathers who informed him that they had passed an ordinance whereby no railroad tracks were to go through the town. Instead, it would be nice if they went around.

Now Chanute was operating on a shoestring, for it was not until railroads had pushed farther west and proved their worth that the Capitalists became more generous with their money. He had skimped on

every inch of track, and a couple of unexpected miles more of it, together with a new right of way to be bought, amounted to calamity.

Also, he was accountable to his stockholders. They had permitted him to enter into this agreement, and Patton had further shown them his good will by his donation of the depot site; and now the inhabitants of this minuscule hamlet of which he owned one half, were bent on making a monkey out of him. The early railroads were not built by weaklings, and Octave Chanute was true to the breed, but every time he tried to enforce his agreement with Patton and stuck a rail across the town line, he encountered a delegation of armed guards. They stayed right there, too, with their shotguns handy, while one their citizens jumped on his horse and rode hell-for-leather to Pontiac, which had recently graduated from a saw mill to the county seat, to get an injunction.

MONEY SQUANDERED.

While Chanute's rage at the situation is completely understandable, the mental processes of the townspeople are only slightly less clear, for the lunatic appropriations of the first Illinois legislature in behalf of the railroads had beggared the state and its settlers for twenty long years and the money squandered had come to nothing.

Furthermore, a number of the citizens were Easterners, and they had brought with them the ideas popular at the time, which were much encouraged by the stage and canal barge lines, that the reckless speed of those infernal machines were a menace to life and limb. Anyway, they reasoned, what would keep the engines from leaping the tracks and running wild, and endanger the innocent children and the livestock? (In truth, the enormous "cow catchers" on the old locomotives were just that.)

Added to all this, was the fact that at least one of their number had suffered a financial trimming at the hands of the railroad back East. A physician of high professional standing had used his influence among his friends and patients, ad-vising them to invest extensively along what he was positive was going to be the right-of-way, but when the railroad took another route altogether, and the wishful speculators were left with only some dubious farm land, the good doctor decided that the climate farther west would be beneficial.

This man was also undoubtedly one reason why not a single share of the Peoria and Oquawka Railroad stock was ever sold in Fairbury, although the citizens did scrape up enough funds, finally, to build themselves a depot. They had to put the thing on stilts to get it out of the mud.

WORK IN DARKNESS.

In the face of this sort of public opinion, Chanute was clever. He did not use force but quietly laid his rails at the western edge, and worked straight on until Saturday night. In the darkness, and secretly, he moved his crews back; and then in the morning, at first dawn, and reinforced by armed guards of his own, he was ready for business. To the consternation of the dumbfounded and helpless villagers, he rushed the track straight through the town and ran a locomotive over it to make it legal, for it was Sunday, and the courthouse was closed. By Monday morning, he was well on his way to Peoria. Chanute finished his railroad that year, and lived to enjoy years of wealth. Later he further proved his prophetic wisdom in new fangled ideas by becoming one of the backers of the Wright Brothers. Chanute Air Field at Rantoul, Illinois was named for him.

Thus it was that Progress gave the dwellers of Fairbury a boost in spite of themselves, and under that impetus, during the first winter, they built themselves a grain elevator and a general store. When spring came a dry goods store started competition. A small hotel followed, then two boarding houses, grocery store, wagon making and repair shop, tavern, lumber yard and Methodist church.

AIDED BY MINING, FAIRBURY GROWS DESPITE DISUNITY

It was the next year, 1858, that John Marsh bought eighty acres of land joining Patton's on the west, and had it surveyed for an addition to the town. He next caused much excitement by going against mining tradition to bore for coal in the open prairie, but he discovered a substantial vein of good quality. It brought real prosperity, for it gave the settlers a cheap fuel and supplied the railroad as well. Heretofore their engines had burned wood cut from the forests, and the supply was fast vanishing.
The mines caused other railroad business to come to Fairbury too, and the merchants were glad to get it until they discovered that it was hard to collect payment. After pressing matters legally, they attached everything possible belonging to the poverty ridden railroad, even going so far as to garnishee freight bills before they were collected, and finally forced it into bankruptcy.

RAILROAD VS. TOWN

The railroad men cherished their grievances, got drunk, and did everything possible to annoy the people. These considered it simple justice when they retaliated, and for ten years both factions pestered the other in every way imaginable until that freight train went through town.

For this occasion the engineer had it fired up heavily before reaching the settlement, and it whizzed through, belching enormous black clouds of smoke and live cinders. It had been a hot dry fall, and the wind was blowing, and the sparks that fell on the East End Elevator burst into ready flames.

When the engineer reached Forrest, his next stop, six miles away, he looked back at the pall of smoke over Fairbury and remarked with satisfaction that he had set the whole damn town on fire.
As a matter of fact, he very nearly had. The business section of East Fairbury was wiped out, and a number of homes went with it.

The stores began rebuilding at once, and suits against the railroad were started. They were pending in the courts for six years, but were never settled.

It took much less time, in fact the ashes from the fire were still warm when the West Enders, as the residents of the Marsh Addition were called, made the interesting discovery that all the cut throat competition with the East End stores had been eliminated, and they piously considered it an Act of God.

GROWTH OF "MARSH TOWN."

This was a time of general prosperity. In addition to the income from the coal mines, the soldiers returning from the Civil War were opening up new farms all around Fairbury. Most of the land was marshy, and so a new tile factory was started to help drain it. It was all experimental, and most of the farmers were exceedingly skeptical about going against nature in such a high handed fashion, and so when the next drought beset them, some dug it all out again.

Yet with all their indecision, crops were growing, being harvested, and hauled into town to sell, and Marsh set about to capture the business in a big way. He bought three hundred acres adjoining his original tract, and he set out to make everybody else look like pikers.

His part of town he located around two squares. One was donated to the city for re-creation purposes, and it was to be called Marsh Park. He considered the lots around this to be choicer, and they were correspondingly higher priced, in spite of the fact that the park was under water every time it sprinkled. The Catholic Church located not far north of this.

The other park he named Livingston Square, and it was to be the market place. The water tower stands there now. On the south side of this he built his Arcade Block, a series of one story red brick buildings, simple and beautiful in design, with fan lights above the doors, and large show windows. These buildings housed two saddle and harness shops, a gun and sporting goods store, a poultry house, a drug store, and the Fairbury Marble works that made the monuments for the local cemetery. Later on they had a bed-spring factory there.

With bait like this, he persuaded the McDowells to build on the north side of Livingston Square. The McDowell Block housed their dry-goods and hardware stores and bank. The second story which formed one large room they named McDowell Hall, and declared it available for re-creation purposes.

HOTEL CROWNING GLORY

Furthermore, Marsh captured the post office for his town. That was on the east side of Livingston Square, in the back of Ramsey's drug store. A restaurant opened next door to it, on the Main Street corner, with Walton's grist mill across the street.

Finally, in 1866 Marsh crowned the whole of his achievements by building the Livingston Hotel. It was a large two-story frame building in "Central Park" bordering the railroad tracks, and a part of the lower floor was used as a depot and waiting room for travelers. It was known far and wide as the only hotel in Central Illinois that had running water.

All this construction work made the modest re-building over in the East End seem like very small potatoes. Patton had sold out his real estate holdings and had gone to Nebraska to found an-other Fairbury there, and now it was Bruce Ams-bary7 who had married a sister of John Marsh's wife, who was the leading citizen. He owned a part interest in a grocery store there.

Whatever started that famous feud is now for-ever lost. It must have been a trivial matter, or it surely would have been remembered, but under Amsbary's driving ambition, the East Enders went to work to match John Marsh, item for item. Marsh had a grist mill, and so they had one. Ditto the dry goods, drug and grocery stores, and the grain elevators. The even decided to have a coal mine, too. Amsbary had to solicit Eastern Capital for this and he imported a group of Scotch miners who did the boring for him.

TEMPLE OF "FREE THOUGHT."

These people gave an unexpected twist to the life of the community, for they were well educated and brilliant, but they scandalized the rest of the town, because they were "Infidels" or "Free Thinkers." They were headed by Amsbary himself, and were a potent force. Their hall (the present building of the Sanitary Cleaners), when they took up a subscription to match the McDowell Hall, was dedicated to

"Free Thought", and in the center of the arch over the stage it bore the date of "94" instead of 1871 A.D. They reasoned it was 94 years after the signing of the Declaration of In-dependence. The address of dedication was given by Robert Ingersoll, the well-known Peoria lawyer and agnostic. The society had no chairs for their audience, but the people ranged themselves on planks placed upon nail kegs. The place was jam-med to the doors, and another crowd stood outside.

Ingersoll spoke there several other times, and then he was challenged to a debate by Reverend Underwood, the President of Eureka College. Fair-bury was chosen as their meeting place, and the townspeople put up a big Tabernacle – on the East side of course - as there was no place in town big enough to hold the crowd. Thousands of people came to hear them, and both men outdid themselves in oratory. Both of them claimed the decision.

Now the East Enders may have been rubbing their hands with satisfaction over the building boom which had drawn them even with the West Siders, but their pleasure suddenly ceased with the arrival of a new railroad, the Chicago and Paducah at the western boundary of the town.

However badly the Peoria and Oquawka had been treated, there was no doubt at all now about the people wanting the Chicago and Paducah road. It was to run from Strawn to Streator, and promised to open up an entirely new territory. To the stupefaction of the Amsbary adherents, they dis-covered that Marsh had secretly used his influence to such effect that the new line was to come just within the city limits on his side of town, and then turn straight south toward Strawn.

The construction gang reached the boundary on Saturday night. The president of the road was on hand, and Marsh and all his friends went up to McDowell Hall where they had quite a party. The hangovers must have been terrific, because early next morning Amsbary and his friends slipped across into enemy territory and laid the rails straight across town, where they were willing that they should then make the turn toward Strawn. They were not able to get hold of a locomotive to run over them until the next day, but the rails stayed down anyway.

To celebrate his victory, Amsbary built. the Fairbury House, and mindful of the lush advertising of the elegant Livingston Hotel, with tongue in cheek, he called his the "Poorest Hotel in Illinois."

Like its rival, the Fairbury House used ‘its ground floor for a ticket office and waiting room, bringing the number of depots in the hamlet to the magnificent total of three.

GANG WARFARE BREAKS OUT IN EARLY FAIRBURY

Any improvement, East or West, and of any sort whatever, was accompanied by bitter arguments, and the arguments were followed by fights. The town had already earned the "worst name" of any in this section of the country. One main reason was that there were so many rough miners, the three mines having become big industry. Because of them, all the _ stores and shops stayed open until ten o'clock at night, and all eight of the saloons stayed open with them.

TOWN DIVIDED

Every night there were at least three or ‘four rip-roaring, ding-dong bloody fights in which the battlers did their best to tear each other to bits, and they seized on every possible pretext for arguments. Every

fight piled fresh fuel on the hatred between the two sections of the town. Not one person was untouched. Even the little boys went to war. The dividing line was Second street, and heaven help the adventurous gamin who dared step over it without plenty of friends and ammunition by way of clods and stones to back him up.

The little West Enders finally conquered the territory over to Seventh street, which crowded the other fellows considerably, but the school house was strictly neutral territory after one big fight had started on the play-ground. Smith Olney, their teacher, might be considered some-thing of a "Miss Nancy" because of his prissy manners and precious pronunciation, but his right arm was nevertheless a vigorous one. He settled their differences in short order by whipping every last one of the boys, and from then on, THAT was THAT.

FAIRBURY BURNS – AGAIN

Thus it was the deadly rivalry between the partisans of Amsbary and Marsh was running high, when the fires started to break out again.

There had already been three extremely disastrous fires only a few months apart, and all three had been proven to be of incendiary origin.

With the first one alone, a whole block of ten wooden business buildings and their contents burned to the ground; seven more with the next; and the third fire took four of the new brick buildings that they had erected after the TP&W locomotive blaze. Still another burned the next time and that was not counting the Amsbary and Jones grain elevator.

This had the East End business district pretty well cleaned out, and so, to the public, it seemed anything but accidental when someone poured kerosene over the piled benches and chairs in McDowell Hall and set fire to them. It was discovered and extinguished however, before much damage was done.

Now these, mind you, were only the spectacular blazes downtown. Added to this was the horrible fact that every few nights someone's home was burned.

The people who remember the old fire bell testify that, quite aside from its sinister meaning, the tone of it was so deep and menacing that it made one's hair stand straight on end. Nobody ever went to bed without carefully arranging his clothes at hand so that they could be put on the instant it began to ring, because EVERY-BODY went to ALL the fires.

Everybody pitched in and helped, even the children, because one never knew when one might need help himself.

ATTEMPTS AT FIRE FIGHTING.

The men and older boys took turns with the pumps of the fire engine, or if it had been delayed getting through the muddy streets, they formed a human chain to pass the buckets of water to the others inside the burning building or on the roof. They carried out furniture and res-cued livestock. The women helped fill and carry water buckets, and salvage articles rescued from the fire. They put these at a safe distance from the flames, and the little girls patiently sat on the piles to keep them from being stolen.

It was a desperate time, and men passed each other on the streets and met in the few remaining places of business, each eyeing the others, and secretly wondering.

One lighter incident in all that trouble was a young man whose landlady accused him of at-tempting to set fire to her house, where he lived. He was arrested and brought to trial, and things looked black for him. He was engaged to marry a lawyer's daughter, and she used her influence to get her father to defend him.

The fire in question had started from kerosene in the basement, and drops of it had been discovered along the stairs. The landlady claim-ed that he bought it for the purpose of setting the fire, but he swore under oath that he had only gone down to fill some lamps, and had spilled a little on the way back. When the trial opened, his lawyer, in his most majestic manner, focused the whole defense into the question of whether those spots legitimately went UP the stairs, or whether the spots went DOWN the stairs for incendiary purposes; and before they realized it, the jury were completely befuddled. They disagreed and the young man was acquitted.

It was no wonder that the townspeople were so jittery, for they had no fire protection off Main Street. When the alarm rang, the notes striking, as now, the number of the ward, the firemen would' rush to the horse cart. If the blaze was at a distance, they would seize the first team of horses at hand and gallop to the fire. When they arrived at the conflagration, they would rip off the top of the household well, stick down the end of their hose, and begin to pump.

"ONE STORY" FIRE CART

Their hose cart had two wheels about five feet high and six feet apart. The pump was on the shaft between the wheels, and the hose wound over it. The pump was a "two-way" affair, it pumped when it went down, and the water spurt-ed again as it came back up. The handles, which were removable, were laid along the shaft for transportation. The firemen, six on a side, took turns working the thing, but even their best efforts threw a stream of water less than fifty feet, and it could not reach the second story of a building. Often it turned to steam before it ever hit the blaze, but if the firemen were busy they felt that they were at least trying to save things. Then the firemen had to just stand, with the frantic property owner, and simply watch things go up in smoke.

Down on Main Street, the Villagers had what they, at first, considered to be the finest of fire protection, not having anticipated their disasters as coming wholesale.

It was a system of five wooden cisterns, one for each block, and each held 240 barrels of water. They were connected by pipes, so that, as they pumped from one, the water went down in all of them. Moreover, there was a well at each end of Main Street, and another in Livingston Square, but when half of down town was ablaze at once and everything had pumped dry, it was just too bad, taxpayers or no taxpayers.

ALARMED CITIZENS CALL HALT TO CITY'S ROWDYISM

Already by this time, Fairbury had earned its reputation of having more disastrous fires than any other town in the Middle West, but more were yet to come. A grist mill that Amsbury had leased went, together with still more stores; and Amsbary, whose finances were by now truly desperate, became specific in his accusations that Marsh had instigated the setting of the fires.

Each faction had a newspaper, among their other properties, each strongly partisan, naturally. Then, even more than now, it was the custom to write letters to the editors giving opinions and voicing grievances, and Amsbary cut loose in print. Marsh had no choice but to reply, even if he had wished to do other-wise, and letter retorted to letter, each one more virulent than the last.

The climax of the whole affair came with the burning of the pride of Fairbury, the elegant Livingston Hotel. The boys remembered this fire because the firemen, in their excitement, carefully carried the feather-beds downstairs and then threw the bedroom crockery out the windows.

CITIZENS REBUKE LEADERS.

After this, the vituperation in the news-papers reached a new pitch. Both men specifically accused the other of arson and both at-tempted to get indictments before the Grand Jury, and at the same time they started suits for alleged slander. At last the citizens of both sides of town became utterly revolted by the display of bitter feeling. They called a joint mass meeting and the Resolutions that they passed were a blistering rebuke.

"Resolved that such deeds are a blight upon our city and an infamous strain upon the characters of the perpetrators, instead of those who would so defame: that we regard with horror and astonishment the actions of men, prostituting their official position to carry out personal spite against their fellow citizens at public expense; that we are utterly opposed to such persons, and believe such attempts to be the ‘result of vindictive personal feelings generated by an old feud on the part of their enemies in the hope to shield themselves from damages in certain suits now pending against them in the courts."

The Amsbarys and the Marshes, ruined by the fires and by litigation, moved away. Outwardly, at least, the town had got together, but the pains of the financial beating they had, lingered until 1890, when the McDowells razed their building on Livingston Square and built anew on Main Street. With that act, the old quarrel was really dead.

In contrast to their elders, however, the end of the war between the boys came almost at once, was abrupt, and complete. The cause of it was a circus. Circuses were pitifully few, anyway, and each one was a major event. They all came into town from the north in wagons and the youths of the village rode all the way out to the DeMoss bridge to meet and escort them into town.

TOGETHER IN COMMON CAUSE.

This one had animals with it, which was practically unheard of, and every boy who could earn, beg, borrow or steal the price of admission was there to get a good look at them, even though the tent was pitched in the middle of Livingston Square. During the performance, the company put on an act that was so vulgar that even the unaesthetic audience objected. Nobody ever really knew how the fight started, but of course, the McDowell boys got the credit.

All at once that old circus battle cry, "Hey, Rube!" went up, and those seasoned circus roustabouts grabbed the thing nearest at hand. From then on it was entirely immaterial whether a boy lived on the East Side of Fairbury or whether he lived on the West Side of Fairbury. The fight was wonderful.

During the fray, the old animosities disappeared under the urgency of keeping their necks: from getting broken. After it was all over, the doctors had considerable patching to do, and it was said that one of the McDowell boys spent the next four days in bed.

When they were all able to be up and about again, they made the interesting discovery that for them, if not completely so for their elders, the Great Feud was finished.

UNITED FAIRBURY LIFTS ITSELF OUT OF THE MUD

The wonder of it was, with all the embittered factions, that Fairbury was able to make any progress at all. Yet progress it did. By the 1880 census there had been 269 inhabitants and enough children to start a school in a reconverted building. Everything, however, came to a stand-still during the Civil War. The town sent its share of men: into the army where they served with credit, leaving wheat to wave over Patton's lot.

Even to soldiers returning to their new town, it must have seemed unprepossessing, A little handful of frame houses appeared to have been flung down at random. Only four were in the northwest part of town. There was not a tree anywhere, save in the timber belt along Indian Creek. There were no lawns, no flowers, only the prairie grass and the weeds, with wagon tracks or a path here and there. A few of the more ambitious house-holders had little cinder paths to their door-ways, and boards across the worst of the puddles.

WANDERING INDIANS.

At night the town remained in unbroken blackness save for the faint candle gleam from a neighbor's far-off window, and families going out for the evening took a lantern with them. Women did not often venture out alone after dark; there were too many drunks.

Sometimes, even yet, a wandering Indian would startle farm women by peering in the windows, for this was still home to them although they had been dispossessed after the Black Hawk War. The one faint rise in the swamp land had been used by the Kickapoo as a camp site, and the soil around there was thick with arrow heads and other relics. (The location was around the Sunken Park and Amish Church.) This was obliterated when the railroads hauled.in dirt on flat cars, and filled it in four feet deep.

Yet the inhabitants were convinced that the place had possibilities. The very first thing they were able to get together on was their water supply to fight the down-town fires. The system had its drawbacks, however, and it became one of the duties of the Mayor to listen to the complaints about the wind-mill that filled it. On breathless summer days when everything was as dry as tinder and the city cisterns were empty, the harassed business men, who had learned from experience what to expect by way of fires, would gather to jaw at the motionless wheel and all the members of the Village Board. In winter they fretted lest the connecting pipes, buried twenty feet underground, would freeze and render the whole system useless.

STREETS DISAPPEAR.

There was real irony in the fact that the City Fathers found it necessary to be concerned with the cisterns when there was an over-supply of water on the surface of the ground. The town was built on

marshy land, and every time it rained the streets simply disappeared. Always, somewhere, there was mud. Mud. Heavy, rich, black Illinois mud that was to grow such bountiful crops. Mud where, in the spring, horses floundered belly deep. Mud of the trails that summer dried into spine-busting ruts.

The gravel they tried on the streets at first promptly sank out of sight with the first spring rains. Slack hauled from the mines proved only a trifle more effective. Every able bodied man in town over twenty-one years of age either paid an annual poll tax of two dollars to the city treasury or labored on village improvements, but it was a physical impossibility for them to build up all the streets, so, into the Mayor's suffering ears were poured the complaints. Each citizen argued that he was paying his hard-earned cash for taxes, and therefore he was just as much entitled as the other fellow to have his mud hole filled.

They were not even particularly grateful, now that it was done, that the Uncle John Kring Lane (the road north on Seventh street), had been fixed to at least be passable. That was the road to Avoca, the people out in that direction had preferred to go all the way to Pontiac rather than drive the much shorter distance to Fairbury and then bog down inside the very town itself. Four-horse teams pulled empty wagons stuck fast along there, and it had taken rocks to fill it.

SWIM IN DITCHES.

Finally, the Village Board came to the conclusion that the only way they ever could make the town site livable would be to dig ditches and drain it. Just one of those ditches cost the taxpayers ten thousand dollars. This, mind you, was during a time when a copper penny had purchasing power in any store.

The ditches, running along one side of the street, were so deep that little boys went swimming in them in the summer time. They were also a major hazard. More than one citizen, wrestling with a team in the throes of a runaway, was flung headlong into one; but he considered himself most fortunate if he did not have to get the horses and wagon, as well as himself out of the steep and muddy banks.

There were bridges across the ditches, both for vehicles and pedestrians, and willow trees grew thick along their banks. They were beautiful and graceful, but their roots, greedily reaching out for moisture, matted so firmly as to impede the current, and held back any refuse that had fallen into it. During the hot weather this stagnant water was covered with a thick scum, another haven for mosquitoes, and the ditches became so befouled that they had to be cleaned periodically, and the refuse hauled away. Four hundred wagon loads of filth were taken out of them during one spring alone.

Although they proved effective drainage for the flooded cellars, it was a little awkward for the home owners who were thus cut off from the street; and so, at intervals over the ditches, there appeared a variation of the "stepping block."

These were called "run ups," and they were inclined foot bridges over the ditch. The high end was on the street side, so that the ladies might mount to their carriages with propriety, since they were allowed by custom to display a shoe to advantage, but never any portion of the black cotton stocking above it. Careful attention was necessary, or a girl easily earned the name of being "fast."

THE FIRST WALKS.

Once the streets had been drained and dried, it was possible to fix the chuck holes so that they would

stay filled. And then, after that, the City Planners were ready for the sidewalks. These board walks became a special point of civic pride, as the newspapers themselves were proud to note. After the mud and the cinder paths, they seemed wonderful, and it was no small additional satisfaction to them that the thirty miles of walks throughout Fairbury were far more than the neighboring town of Pontiac enjoyed.

To construct them, two narrow boards were placed on edge to raise the walk above the ground, and then equal lengths of wider boards were nailed across them. This naturally divided the walk into sections, and annually, at Halloween time, whole lengths disappeared from their accustomed places.

Also their being made of wood caused them to be correspondingly fragile. A runaway horse, hitting them sent the splinters flying; and the Blade called attention to the numerous cows throughout the town that had been tethered too close to the walks, crushing them and covering them with blobs of manure.

Conceivably, their owners intended them as weed mowers, for the tough grass and weeds hung thick over the walks. The wild sweet clover was particularly disliked, in spite of its perfume, because of its special ability to catch the ladies skirts.

There were one or two other minor disadvantages about the walks. In the winter time they creaked so noisily beneath their coating of snow that anyone entertaining any notions of being clandestine must have been abashed. Footsteps, during sub-zero weather, sounded like a series of pistol shots. Hot weather, on the other hand, caused the knot holes to ooze resin. These grew in size and hardened into big bumps, causing curious oddities in gait even in the cold sober. According to the town wits, it was impossible to tell, from appearance, if even a Deacon of the church was not "three sheets in the wind."

It was a very special point of town pride that these walks were always kept in good repair. The City Street Commissioner, carrying a bucket of nails and a hammer, patrolled the walks, fastening down loose boards and replacing broken ones. The repair bill for only one year was over $2,000.00; but whenever the Village Board showed signs of becoming frugal and skimping on that part of the budget, there was always someone to remind them of the time Mrs. Rogers tripped and fell, breaking ‘her leg. She sued the city and got $1,500 damages, thereafter proving to be no small impetus to civic progress. -

VARIOUS ODORS, SULFUR WATER, PLAGUE GROWTH

Fairbury made more improvements downtown, too. There the walks had been built high off the ground to get them out of the mud. This facilitated descent from the carriages, and unexpectedly provided a convenient hiding place beneath them for little boys. Once a skunk was cornered under there for several days, and created a divertissement.

At the end of each block the walks sloped down to the street crossings on planks placed lengthwise. The crossings themselves were long blocks of stone, six or eight inches high, and vehicles always jolted as they went over them. since Main Street was churned hub deep most of the time, every wheel was a solid disk of mud. When they went over the stone crossings, the jar always knocked the mud out of the spokes. Often times the chunks left there weighed seven or eight pounds and these had to be dug off every day. While he was downtown, the Street Commissioner was almost
never seen without a shovel across his shoulders.

NEW BUSINESS SECTION.

Everyone preferred this thicker form of mud, for when the rains were heavy it would be thin, and splashed all over the walks and everything within reach. By springtime, with all the manure droppings, the odor therefrom became terrific, but nothing could be done until dry weather came and it could be shoveled up and carted off in wagons.

The business houses of the town, too, were much improved. Livingston Square had shops on three sides of it and was open on the west. There were hitching racks around it in front of the stores, and a windmill stood in the middle to keep the horse troughs filled.

The remainder of the stores straggled along the north side of the five blocks that comprised the Main Street. For the most part they were one story wooden buildings with false fronts, a house or two among them, and a few brick buildings.

Each business place had a wooden awning over the walk in front of it that was supported by poles edging the street. This gave nearly complete coverage from one end of the district to the other in case of rain. There was an ordinance prohibiting the use of these poles as hitching posts, but every once in a while somebody would forget, and a startled team would yank out a pole, down would come a section of awning to cause a few casualties among the pedestrians and loafers. The latter were especially thick along there on Sundays, when they would gather to whittle up the wooden boxes thrown out from the stores.

Nevertheless, however proudly a citizen of Fairbury might point to the north side of Main Street, he invariably squirmed with embarrassment when a stranger turned around in the opposite direction and audibly wondered what ailed the place.

As before stated, the ground around the railroad tracks was low. It was so low that it was under water most of the time, and they called that pitiful pond the Commons. It was shunned for building purposes because, even on the North side of the street, which was a trifle higher, flooded cellars were too ordinary for comment.

Midway, and adjoining the tracks, sprawled the lumber yard. A grist mill stood down at the west end and a grain elevator at the east. There were a few hitching racks, intended to take care of the overflow of carriages and wagons in front of the stores; and, as if the place was not wet enough to begin with there was a well and iron watering trough in every block. Each pump had an iron cup chained to it for the benefit of thirsty humans, for they had never heard of germs.

Several of these wells were open ones. They were cleaned out once in a while, but not until it was deemed to be worth the trouble, and several wagon loads of filth could be taken out at one time. Occasionally a horse would fall into one of them, and then it needed a block and tackle to get it out. It was considered to be a real feat of engineering if the horse could be brought up uninjured. Anything smaller than a horse just fell in and drowned. Maybe it was discovered and fished out. Maybe not.

THE CITY DUMP.

It was these Commons between Main Street and the railroad tracks that were the dumping grounds. The grocers from across the street threw their rotten fruit and vegetables there, and anybody in town having anything for disposal, added it to the pile. It was a welter of chicken feathers, rags, defunct

vegetables, bones, old wheels, hoop _ skirts and broken crockery. That was before the day of tin cans.

There were even times when the smell from the dump could be distinguished above that of the manure on the street. For that matter, the beautiful Arcade Block was perfumed, too; it had the poultry house. Furthermore, in the good old summer time, with a soft south wind blowing, the visitor fought for breath with a few more stinks added, for then they had the fumes from the mines, and the stench from the slaughter house, a mile out of town.

Under the Blade's vigorous prodding, the poultry and the slaughter houses were cleaned up, and a part, at least, of the trash was hauled out of town.

So it was that several years passed before the citizens received a new, ever present, and horrible smell that they had to pay for, and about which they could do nothing whatever.

The City Fathers, thinking to quiet the gripes about the fire cisterns, had proudly instituted a water system for the town from the well in Livingston Square. It proved completely inadequate, and during the summer months there were frequent notices in the newspapers warning property owners of the imposed limits regarding the use thereof.

ARCADE BLOCK SINKS.

Human nature being what it is regarding civic improvements, they might have managed to get along nevertheless, except that the Arcade Block sank, caused by a mine tunnel that ran beneath. It was no sudden cave-in, but a gradual sinking. It was first noticed by a TWP.&W. engineer, for the drop had left one of his rails eight inches lower than the other. When he ran over it this time, there was such a movement along the train that he thought he had run off the track. When he ran back to investigate, he discovered what had happened, and he reported at the station.

For several days the sinking caused fevered excitement throughout the town, because it was impossible to tell how much farther it would go. There was already a decided difference between street levels, which is noticeable to this day, and the water tower, which stood on steel supports, had shifted to a dangerous angle.

Engineers were called in for consultation. They ordered a new tower; and the City Fathers decided that, while they were about it, they might just as well dig a new and better well. They got sulfur water.

For years, visitors to Fairbury drank copiously from the city faucets, under the impression that anything that smelled so evil must, of necessity, be strongly medicinal. Traveling salesman complained vociferously, but the citizens became immune, even to the point that when they visited elsewhere they innocently commented on the flatness of the water they encountered.

Yet, even with this new city well, the outskirts of town were still unsupplied. They had no fire protection, and running water for household uses was furnished by their own windmills. It was not until 1914, when the Township High School was built, that they got around to this, and at the same time, for the first time, all the wells in Fairbury were tested. Only two in all the town were found to be uncontaminated by sewerage.

Nevertheless, before we shake our heads any more over the early sanitary conditions of our town, it

might be well for us to remember that some of those settlers lived to a hearty old age. It just could be that they are shaking THEIR heads over US. Just maybe they are thinking that it is a lot simpler to be bitten by a germ than it is to be hit by an automobile.

CHURCHES STRIVE TO END ERA OF "GRACELESS LIVING"

What with all the feuding and fighting, general drunkenness and wholesale arson, the churches of Fairbury had their work cut out for them. The preaching was of the eternal damnation brand, and, it must be admitted, there were plenty of concrete examples.

A visiting Revivalist, hit in the head with a chunk of sod or a rock, pitched through an open window, was able to draw an even hotter picture of hell. In winter, church meetings regularly broken up by red pepper thrown on top of the heating stove, reducing the entire congregation to helpless coughing that drove. Them home. Or, it might be just plain noise that drowned out all the services.

ATTACKS "GRACELESS LIVING"

The churches, however, received powerful help when John Scibird moved to town. Himself a Methodist, he had long lived in Bloomington, where he was Postmaster and member of the City Council, and the editor of a couple of newspapers, one of them being the Pantagraph. He was a man of high morals, besides having a family of his own, and he went right after some of the graceless young members of his church in print. When the janitor complained that some of the boys, sitting together in the back seats, relieved the tedium of the sermon by spitting tobacco juice into puddles on the floor, Scibird lectured the culprits severely, and threatened to publish their names if it happened again.

This threat was equally effective with those youths who skipped school to play marbles all day long at one of the depots, and also with the laggards who were habitually tardy. Nor did he spare the parents.

His reproofs were frequent and blistering, and they covered a rich field. For instance, the evening services of the churches were dating time for the young people. The girls came in decorously with their parents for the preaching, while their swains waited outside. Later, as they emerged from the church and came down the steps, each one's particular admirer would advance and ask permission to walk her home.

There were no telephones, of course, and it was a spontaneous, after church arrangement, whereby each boy took a chance on his particular girl having come that night. To avoid standing around outside all to no purpose, when they might be doing something much more interesting, they would go in, one by one, and look the audience over to make certain if their girl was there.

COLD DRAFTS.

Their interruptions were a major annoyance to the congregation. Also, there was the matter of cold drafts around their feet and across the back of their necks every time the door swung; and the breaks in their attention drove the ministers to wrath. One of them threatened to put up a slate on the entry way, and have each girl register as she come in, making a roster that might be easily consulted. Scibird warmly applauded the idea.

Sometimes a couple of the boys would discover they were both waiting for the same girl, and then a fight would break out. There was always a lot of yelling along with the fighting, and the attention of the church goers would snap from the Minister's "thirdly," to puzzle over who it could be; what started the fight this time; and who was likely to be winning.

Scibird suggested that the boys come in and have their morals improved. He also vigorously belabored them for the way they lined up along the walks after services to whistle at the girls and make audible comments about them as they passed. He reminded these "tony young men" of the rigid social law forbidding any man who even PRETENDED to be a gentleman, to smoke in the presence of a lady. He furiously added that their tobacco smoke and loud talk made the front walks of the churches like bar rooms; (and it is to be remembered that, in those days every woman looked straight ahead when she passed a saloon unless she was not the respectable kind.)

THE MCDOWELL BOYS

His phrase, "tony young men" referred specifically to the McDowell boys, Elmer, Tommy, and Johnny, sons of Isaac P.

Their father, an Elder of the church, was a tall, thin man with a bald head and chin whiskers; and one who remembered, described him briefly as a "sanctimonious old coot."

He left his religion in his pew, and on week days he busily wrung a fortune from a reluctant world with tombstones, real estate, banking, or anything else that came to hand. He was widely considered to drive better than a shrewd bargain, but he displayed the most amazing gullibility about his boys.

Elmer was the oldest of their gang, and for years they perpetrated most of the mischief around Fairbury. Other boys, as was natural did a few things, too, but if there was any doubt at all about who were the culprits, the McDowell boys instantly received credit.

The Methodists forgave them some of their pranks because of the side—splitting performances they put on after church when they had removed the wheel taps from their father's buggy. All the horses and buggies were tied at long hitching racks in front of the churches, and the rest of the Methodist congregation learned to linger and watch Isaac's family drive away. One by one his wheels would fall off, and as he wrestled to get them back in place, his boys would express the profoundest sympathy, wondering loudly who could have done such a cowardly thing to such a nice old man.

They gave repeat performances of this, undoubtedly by popular request, varying it with the times they hid the taps under the cushions of the back seat, so that wheels kept coming off all the way home.

What happened one Conference time, however, was a completely different matter. The Methodist Ministers of the surrounding country met at Fairbury to transact annual church business and to be assigned to their pulpits. It was customary for the members of a local church to take one or more of the visiting clergymen to their homes for the night, and so Isaac McDowell, being an Elder, invited a couple of them to go home with him.

There was another meeting after supper, and as the men walked back to the church after dark, the boys slipped up behind them and slugged the visitors with a piece of rubber hose. Their victims knew enough about the town that they made specific accusations, which the Elder denied in horror. For proof, they all rushed back to the house where they found the boys even at that early hour, "sound asleep" in

bed.

Their father might never have been any the wiser, but the boys had discovered an interesting brand new sport. For several nights they hung around the dark alleys of the Arcade Block, busily cracking all heads that came into reach, and there were a fair number of casualties before they were caught and arrested. They were let off with a fine, but Scibird's next paper, which was published weekly, carried the full account under the headlines: "Rubber Hose, $9.45 A FOOT."

PAPERS FLOURISH IN WAR AGAINST CRIME, EACH OTHER

We have witnessed how the churches of nineteenth century Fairbury dealt with the hoodlums and culprits/of that period, and a little of the newspapers' part in the crusade to lift the morals of the town. Now more of the latter.

The Blade Editor, at this time, Scibird, was a man of vigorous courage, and he went to war with his pen over the abduction of Annie Manning. Under the heading of "An Infernal Outrage," he told her story:

Ann Manning had come to Fairbury with the promise of a position of waitress at $3.00 a week. It was good wages for such work, and Annie was anxious to get it, especially as it was Molly Stewart, her cousin, who had written to her. What Annie did not know was that Molly was an inmate of Leonard Gardner's house of prostitution, one of the many in Fairbury. (By 1896 the City Clerk had registered fifty-four such houses. Gardner's place, as were some others, was outside the town limits and would need no license.)

Gardner and Molly took her there and kept her prisoner, but in a few days she managed to get word to the authorities; and after a little gun play, the State's Attorney's men succeeded in rescuing her.

Deep indignation was expressed by all classes of citizens at the dastardly and vicious attempt to ruin an innocent girl. Some of the best citizens feeling that the law could hardly punish this outrage as it deserved, expressed the belief that nothing but the court of Judge Lynch would ever rid this community of this vile den -where such wrongs could be attempted or perpetrated. Certain it is, the patience of our people will not tolerate the nuisance much longer, judging from the feelings expressed on Monday when the prospect seemed fair that the guilty parties were likely to go un-whipped of justice.

"THEY HAVE TO GO."

That was on May 3rd. Three weeks later there was a short paragraph: "Sheriff Hunter was in town Monday, gathering in the boys for witnesses at the Gardner trial Tuesday. When Mr. Hunter “gets after them, they have to go, and there's no use trying to dodge him."

The consequences in happy homes, following that visit of the Sheriff, can be clearly imagined.

On June 21st, of that same year, 1879, there was a final report: "On last Friday and Saturday the Gardner troupe of prostitutes shipped themselves and furniture to more congenial climes. Report says they went to Alton. They have gone and it is to stay, it is hoped. State's Attorney Murdock and C. C. Strawn, Esq. have the hearty thanks of the better part of this community for the vigorous and effective prosecution of Gardner and his crew which resulted in the breaking up of the establishment, sending to prison and driving away the entire lot."

Sensations like this came all too seldom. The rest of the time the weekly issues were filled with accounts of practical jokes on prominent citizens, drunken brawls, the latest details of the more interesting romances, and of course, the Parties. Scibird's knowledge of reader psychology was a practical one. Instead of saying that twenty-five guests attend a function, he would state, with a flourish, that "a quarter of a hundred were present." Any gathering with any pretense of style was "recherche." "Soiree" was another word he commonly used for a party, as was "Soiree dansante." He described weddings with a full list of guests and presents given by them.

"BACK STAIRS" MANSIONS.

As did all the other editors of his time, Scibird called any home bigger than a shack a "mansion." The new Isaac Walton home was the exception: this one was a "Chateau."

(A mansion was once defined as a house that had a back stairs; or one having three or more chimneys. This latter was because they indicated the number of rooms the occupants heated in the winter, betokening their scale of luxurious living.)

Possibly to Scibird's French influence could be traced the local livery stable that advertised itself as "Seller's Equine Bureau" and the Fairbury barber who made "Pate de Foie Gras Hair Tonic" which he guaranteed a cure for dandruff.

During the weeks when things were dull, anything served as news, and the editor gravely reported that "Will Fugate's cow died of a broken neck." If all else failed, he fell upon any rumors going around and printed those.

Yet, small town newspaper though it might be, the Independent Blade was a cut above the average. Anyone, then could start a newspaper. All a man needed were a few cases of type, a bundle of paper, a Washington hand press, and a "devil." There was evidence, too, that only a little education was necessary to become an editor, and some of their papers made a reader wonder what in the world had been their occupation before they took to print.

To contrast them, Scibird had a working knowledge of grammar, a fair vocabulary, a courageous, crusading spirit, and a typesetter that knew his business. George Franzen, his compositor and early resident of Fairbury, and known to all as "Peck" even after he became Mayor of the place, was so expert at setting type that he held a record of sorts throughout Illinois.

SKYLARKING AT THE BLADE.

Ed Scibird, John's son, was Assistant Editor, and Steve Murdock, son of the State's Attorney, whose office was overhead, was devil.

Sometimes there appeared at the head of the Personal Column a sentence or two that suggested that the devil had moved things on the compositor just before the paper went to press.

They had to be short, or Peck would have noticed them. "George Franzen got another perfumed letter." or "George Franzen is not Married," or maybe even one like this, "Uncle Jesse Titus says that he had no objections to George Franzen going with the girls, but he does object to George forming platoons of

three with a blushing damsel on each arm and crowding people off the sidewalk." There was skylarking at the old Blade Office.

Sometimes the editor himself got a bit roguish, and mentioned "John McDowell's Soiree with a Mule," or called potatoes "Irish Lemons."

Or, there might be something like this: "As one of our young bloods was sitting on the steps of a Paducah Avenue (Walnut Street) residence last Sunday evening beside his loved one, he claimed the right to a kiss for every shooting star. She at first demurred, as becomes a modest maiden, but finally yielded. She was even so accommodating as to call his attention to flying meteors that escaped his attention, and at last got him down to steady work on the light of a lantern that a brakeman was swinging about the depot in the distance where the stock train was switching. Isn't that about right, Frank?"

This happy era of the publishing of the Independent Blade ended in 1881 with the death of John Scibird. His son, Ed, took charge for a short time until it could be sold, and then the family moved away.

Wherewith there followed, for the next thirteen years, a succession of editors who tarried but briefly, repented of their bargain, and moved on to more lucrative businesses. It was evident that most of them were unhappy with the paper, and subscriptions fell. To make matters worse, Fairbury had another newspaper now. One of their own migrant editors had sold the Independent Blade with the usual promise not to start another paper in Fairbury. This he broke as a matter of course, and the Local Record came into being in 1883. Just seven months later, he sold out again to Charles Brydia, who had been publishing the Saunemin, Illinois paper.

A RUNNING BATTLE.

Immediately the two papers began a running battle, for it was customary and the readers expected it. The Blade traded insults with him, calling him "Brydia, the windbag of the Local Record," and received bouquets in kind. The Blade editor got discouraged and decided to sell, and this time part interest was bought by young Newt Fulton, a local boy, who had been Brydia's own foreman. Also with the ‘Blade now, was Peck Franzen, back again from wandering; and with a pair like that, the Blade suddenly came to life, sat up, and started flexing its muscles.

From then on, Brydia was busy dodging, although he generally gave as good as he took; but there were times when Newt sharpened his pen and dipped it in vitriol.

"CAP SEEMS TO FIT"

"A certain alleged newspaper man hereabouts, complains that the Blade never mentions him by name. It doesn't have to. Every time the Blade says 'donkey' the A.N.M. in question brays 'here' and every time the Blade says 'skunk' the A.N.M. stinks responsively. For instance, the Blade article of which he complains was about an alleged newspaper man who had been lying about his circulation, and how did he know the Blade meant him and what call had he to get mad?

This A.N.M.is constantly exemplifying the words of the old hymn:"Here, Lord, I give myself away. 'Tis all that I can do!"

‘Straight into this barrage there walked a Mr. Windle who already owned a newspaper in El Paso, Illinois, and who had decided to try his fortunes in Fairbury. -

From the very first, his position was equivocal because his Fairdealer professed to be strongly Prohibition, whereas his El Paso paper was pro-Saloon; and the night that he was drunk and fell off the train did not go unnoticed, you may be sure.

DODGES FORMALITY.

Somehow or other, Windle got himself elected to the Fairbury School Board, and shortly thereafter his Fairdealer received a nice job of printing with the formality of all the papers offering bids on the same. This was straight against the law, and immediately the air quivered with the baying of the newshounds. The press of all the neighboring towns took up the chase, and both the Local Record and the Blade dropped everything else to concentrate on Windle.

It was a masterly performance, and it was too much for Mr. Windle. He left town for an immediate vacation and shortly thereafter, he moved away entirely, leaving the Blade and the Local Record to undisputed possession of their territory.

The Blade was howling Republican, and the Record was rabid Democrat. Beside the administration of local and national government and the resulting elections, the two of them argued among other things, the issue of Free Silver, the impending Pure Food Laws, Woman's Suffrage, and the local mine strikes. Both were prospering again after the recent and terrible depression which had wrecked so many of the Fairbury business houses, and at the close of 1899 both editors were busy with the things that concerned the interests of the town.

Looking back at it now, it seems amazing to us that neither of them so much as mentioned the close of their Century. They confidently hustled into another new year, quite unaware of course, that their familiar way of life was being finished forever.

Within a few short years, the electric lights, the automobile, and the telephone had extinguished their old manners and customs, and even their standards of thinking. By the end of the first World War, the very household articles that had been in everyday use in their homes had already found their way into museums and antique shops, and the opinions of the so-called "Gay Nineties" were no less quaint. The world was on the move.

NEW DEPOT A SIGN OF GROWING UNITY.

One of the most convincing signs that the wounds of the old Amsbary-Marsh feud were healing, and that the town was enjoying a healthy growth, was the building of a single railroad depot to serve the entire community.

The fate of the original depot built on Patton's grant was not recorded. Probably it had slowly sunk out of sight into the mud. The second, for the West End, had been the lobby of the plush Livingston Hotel, and they lost it of course, when it was burned.

As for the third, in the East End, the force of public opinion compelled the Fairbury House to surrender

the privilege. It stood on the corner of Fourth Street and Walnut, then known as Paducah Avenue, and many of the trainmen lived there. For the accommodation of them and passengers, a wooden platform had been built from the front of the hotel across the street to the tracks. This completely obstructed the street, forcing all vehicles to detour around the block, and the day it was torn out was an occasion of great general rejoicing.

The new Fairbury depot was freight, express and telegraph office, a low wooden structure with a board loading platform extending its length. At night it was lighted by oil lamps set on high posts, which sometimes exploded, scattering flaming oil.

The building itself housed the freight, express and telegraph offices, and provided separate waiting rooms for men and women. Each waiting room had wooden benches around the walls which separated into single seats by iron arm rests and each room was heated by a pot-bellied stove and lighted by oil lamps hanging overhead; but the room for men could be distinguished at a glance, it always had spittoons.

Over night, the new depot became an important social center. The lucky travelers waiting for their trains, visited with each other, the men comparing business conditions, and the women discussing styles and sales, for a good number of the passengers went to Peoria to shop and to transact business. Friends joined friends for the journey, all feeling pleasantly important to be going out of town, and to be interviewed by the reporters from the newspapers, knowing that the item would be in the next week's edition. Conversely, the depot was no place for reticence, and the travelers who resented the importunities of the reporters were reproved in print for their lack of public spirit.

Always there was a crowd of envious onlookers to heighten the satisfaction of those who were going away, for anyone down-town at train time automatically went over to the depot, and the unfortunates who were unable to leave their places of business stood in the doorways to watch the trains come in. A train, to these pioneer people immobilized by the miles of mud surrounding their town, meant a thrill to watch the little engines with their big smokestacks rolling smoke, pulling a string of a few rattling wooden cars behind them. They always stopped with a dramatic blast of steam. Then the baggage trucks rolled into place to receive the mail and luggage while the passengers came down the steps of the coaches. Friends and relatives surged forward to meet them, to give way, in a moment, to those who were leaving.

It was so fascinating that the depot speedily became a favorite loafing place for both men and boys. Often feminine passengers were genuinely shocked by the loud talk and profanity, and if they were pretty, they were apt to have the additional annoyance of having "mash" notes handed to them by the means of small boys.

These boys were a pestilence. Their chief amusement was to mount the steps of the passenger cars and ride the short distance to the mines. There were so many of them and they were so ill—mannered, and the practice was so continuous, that it was most difficult to get on or off a train. They shoved men and women alike, treading on toes and gowns. They Climbed the engine and tried to ride the cow-catcher and otherwise harried the trainmen until the railroad officials forcibly broke up the practice.

In fact, Fairbury became known far and wide, and for very good reasons, and another of these reasons was the McDowell boys. It got so that on the passenger trains, moving on again into Fairbury after the stop at the mines for coal, had their brakemen go through the coaches, bawling:"Fairbury! Fairbury! Pull your windows down!"

The initiated complied immediately; but the innocents who wondered what all the fuss was about and hesitated until the train had reached depot, were caught slam in the face with a well—aimed pie.

Blackberry or raspberry pies obtained from the railroad restaurant were the favorite missiles, as the results from these were particularly spectacular, ‘but a brush full of paint or whitewash swiped across a victim's face was almost as good, or even a stick with a blob of "car dough" om it. ("Dough" was the hard grease in the wheel boxing of the railroad cars.)

Sometimes, if the passengers were too wary, all of the train windows remained closed. Then the McDowell boys would stage a rousing fight with much yelling and arm swinging. Human curiosity can stand just so much, and so up would go the windows again. The heads would pop out to see what was going on, with horrible results, and in a few minutes another train with its luckless passengers would pull out to spread the news afar, their feelings in no way modified by the howls of laughter from the depot loafers.

FLAG POLES MARK RALLYING PLACES IN YOUNG CITY

In spite of the hazards, however, train travel became increasingly popular, and in the evening in all the towns along the line, all the larger social functions entertaining out of town guests were timed according to the train schedule. A good part of their fun was getting there, for the double, red-plush car seats were reversible, making it possible for four people to sit together; and come dusk, it was cozy when the brakeman came through to light the lamps overhead and poke up the fire in the stove at the end of the car.

Ventilation throughout the train was regulated from the individual windows, regardless of the wishes of the luckless passengers sitting nearby. The thick, acrid smoke and cinders that whipped through the windows were of little moment. A heavy layer of soot on one's face and neck was accepted as part of the train ride, and the mark of distinction of having been out of town.

The windows themselves, however, were sometimes most difficult to adjust, and the common wolf approach was to offer to assist a young lady with her window.

On Excursion Days, passengers got round-trip tickets at attractively reduced rates to various points where something special was going on, and the trains were jammed to the doors. When the new Nebraska Territory was opened up, the real-estate operators not only ran special trains at reduced rates, but they also refunded the fare if a land purchase was made.

The Chatsworth wreck, which was among the worst in railroad history, resulted from one of these Excursions to Niagara Falls. On the return trip a grass fire had weakened the wooden supports of a bridge, causing it to collapse when the double-headed train ran over it. The flimsy wooden coaches smashed into kindling as they tumbled down the embankment. A hundred people were killed out-right, but hundreds of others were left injured and dying. All of the Fairbury doctors and many other helpers went over to give assistance that night

There were Excursions near home, too, and the service of special trains for special events along the route was a regular accommodation.

Fairbury Fair always had several of them for its big days, and political meetings that had big-name

speakers were thus assured of large audiences. Torchlight parades went with the oratory, and, when a particularly hot issue was at hand, even the little boys had parades of their own.

Everything relating to politics was strictly masculine, and no women were allowed on the trains going to these rallies. Sometimes these were fourteen cars long, and it took a conductor to every car to keep any kind of order. It was commonly believed that the Republicans behaved themselves fairly well, but about fifty per cent of the Democrats got drunk.

The Fairbury rallies were held down on Main street, each party gathering around its own flag pole. The one at the East End near the common was the Democratic; the middle one, near the depot, was the Republican; and the one at the West End, the Prohibition, was close to the Arcade Block, and had a large gilded ball on top.

It is said that they never tore down each others poles, but "each party used to rally around their own poles and just raise the dickens" with speeches and singing. Once in a while there might be an argument on the edge.

The Excursions and pleasure trips took place in the summer because winter storms were apt to be serious. There were no snow plows for their engines, and any drifts on the track had to be shoveled off by hand. The snowbanks along the Chicago and Paducah tracks were sometimes from four to seven feet deep and ran four miles or more. One such drift took twenty-seven men twenty-four hours to dig it clear. (That record of hours and labor is note-worthy.) Sometimes it was days before a train could get through. Trains were often snowbound all night and rescue parties from nearby farms had to go out with bobsleds of fuel and food. One of the first groups of stranded passengers in the country managed to keep warm by smashing and burning the car seats.

The train crew, nevertheless, had fun along with their worries. One freight train ‘went through Fairbury with a snow man, dressed in an old coat and smoking cap, riding on top.

Scibird found out about some fun too! "There was a locomotive elopement on the Chicago and Paducah road at Gibson City on Tuesday morning. It came about while the engineer and fireman and other boys were in the depot 'discussing' a stray box of peaches. The engine, with steam up, stood on track, detached from the train. The valves opened from some cause, and the 'Masheen' moved off slowly at first, but soon 'lit out! at lightning speed with valves wide open, and ran about four miles before it exhausted the steam. Another engine at hand hauled the "Elopee' back to business, then the freight started north, arriving at Fairbury three hours behind time."

FLIES, FIGHTS AND HALLOWEEN PESTER CITIZENS

Like the depot, the post office was another informal gathering place for both young and old. As there were no mail deliveries, it was necessary for the villagers to carry their own; and so, as soon as the mail bags had been brought from the train, the hopeful began to gather.

The post office itself was located in the back of Ramsey's Post Office Store, and to reach the window it was necessary to pass along counters filled with general merchandise, such as "tobacco, school and blank books, nice library lamps, the best five cent cigars in the country, candy and nuts, patent medicines of all kinds, stationery, toy velocipedes, wagons, croquet sets, Rogers Groups of Statuary, groceries and violins." As the aisles filled, hurried business men, trying to wedge their way to the window through all the sociability, were driven to frenzy when they discovered that the Postmaster

himself had stopped for a prolonged gossip. Bitter protests only drew a cold warning in The Blade: "When you wish for your mail, do not stand opposite your box and pound on the number."

The walk back home was an opportunity to shop, or at least see what the stores had to offer. This was particularly true of the grocery stores, which operated almost on a day-to-day basis. During the summer this was displayed along the sidewalk in open bins and racks. Dust and flies moved in clouds all along the streets, and some of the more progressive merchants attempted to cover their choicest wares with pieces of mosquito netting. Their customers, however, raised —these so often to see what was underneath, that they became fly traps instead. Window and door screens were unknown, and dirt and bugs entered the shops without hindrance, settling on the wares displayed on the open counters. Many of the staple foods were kept in uncovered barrels where the mice played at night. Tinned food, there was none. And every family expected to preserve its own meat, fruits, and vegetable. There were never any tomatoes at any time. These were called "love apples" and were considered highly poisonous.

Lemons and oranges were few, and the lucky child who received an orange in his stocking on Christmas morning, treasured it until it had definitely begun to spoil, and they ate it, peel and all.

By mid-winter, eggs were equally precious. There was no way of preserving them and so, when the cold made the hens quit laying, their hungry owners had to do without. In bitter weather, the farmer who got to town with a few eggs was nearly mobbed, and was even able to sell them at the fabulous price of 25¢ a dozen. Occasionally, the bartenders managed to beat the rush, and then there would be a celebration with Tom and Jerry's, accompanied by the lamentations of the cooks.

Rotten eggs were equally in demand, but by the boys of the town. The East and West feud was dead, of course, but in its place there flourished a lively war between the town and the farm boys. The latter appeared in town on Saturdays, and as regularly, they attempted to clean out the place. "A good many lads of sixteen years and upwards were in town last Saturday, and seemed to be doing their best to be checking a drought in this city. The Saloons were swarming with them the whole day, and at night the sidewalks were too narrow for their navigation."

The town boys naturally, rallied to the defense, and the battles that surged through the streets and alleys were memorable. The eggs were their most popular missiles, but anything at all would do – stones, Clods, rotten pumpkins or vegetables; and if a stray pedestrian accidentally happened to step within range, it was counted his own hard luck.

It was a Situation that was hard to bear, for the citizens felt they had enough to endure with their own boys without additions. They never knew when they went down to work, they would find all the signs up and down the street interchanged again.

And Halloween time was pure nightmare. Most of the day following was spent hunting scrambled personal property that was scattered around town. Certain things were automatically expected; the wandering front gate, the overturned privy, the vegetables and the dead cats scattered on the front porch, and the missing sections of board side walks and fences.

Occasionally there was something a little more spectacular to engage their attention, such as a farm wagon on the school house roof. It took real work to get that wagon apart, hoist it piece by piece, and reassemble it up there against the stars; and much more work later, and at a price, to get it down again. To the maddened owner, it was anything but a joke.

It was serious enough for editorial comment: "Halloween, the day the boys celebrate, is billed to arrive in Fairbury. next Wednesday. It will be best to deposit your front gate in the cellar if you want to save time and trouble the following morning; also take the chain off the dog and lock it around your buggy wheels-—-the chain, not the dog-~and for your neighbor's sakes put your turnips and cabbages where the small boys can't get at them. Be wise and prepare against the evil day."

A few years later, there was a young editor, it seems: "To a small boy it is a pleasure to see the head of the house go out in the gray dawn of the following morn and discover his coal house and other property in some neighbor's yard several blocks away. To a grown person, the custom is a vicious one, but it was inaugurated by our forefathers, and in respect to their memory, we say, ‘Let 'er go!'"

THE STUFFED CLUB A POTENT FACTOR IN EARLY DAYS

Fair Week was another nightmare, at ‘least to the constables, as it was accompanied by fresh swarms of boys. At this time they came from Chicago, Peoria, and St. Louis, and ostensibly they were bootblacks. In reality, they were accomplished pick-pockets, and petty thieves, and their harvest was a rich one until the harried authorities, already frantically trying to keep the village respectable by shooing the droves of visiting prostitutes and Fairbury's own, off the streets took to rounding up every strange boy loose in town and jailing him until the Fair was over, and then "warning him out of town."

Even after the fair was over the town had its own "Stuffed Club" gang left, and there was a time when no man, regardless of age or profession, was safe outdoors after sundown, not even if he was with a lady.

These boys, dodging among the dark shadows, struck from behind and a man was knocked down before being aware that anyone was even near him. Usually the boys were content with merely stunning their victims, but upon at least one occasion a group of clergymen were brutally beaten. The boys became so bold that they even attacked the crowds leaving shows at the opera house.

After nearly every man in town had been swatted at one time or another the gang must grown a little careless for one of the "clubs" was captured. "A 'stuffed club' has been found and is on exhibition at The Blade office. It is a canvas stick six inches in diameter and 12 inches long. It is stuffed with excelsior and coarse salt, and tied to a stick two feet long. It is used to thump people on the streets after dark."

After this discovery the clubs were used more openly and among other things, they established a sort of censorship of strangers coming into town. A newcomer who opened a place of business that threatened the family pocketbook of a gang member, was quickly induced by a stuffed club to settle elsewhere.

The gang also eliminated practically all outside competition with the girls, being especially hard on the Pontiac boys who unlike themselves, had a reputation of being quite fancy dressers. The first time the caller appeared, he was let off with a warning, since it was considered that ignorance was the cause of his mistake; but if he appeared again, they waited until he had reached his loved one's gate, and paused to wipe the dust off his shoes with his pocket handkerchief, then fell upon him with rotten eggs. One dose of this indignity was usually sufficient to keep him clear of the town, but if his bravery exceeded his discretion, and he came the third time, he got the stuffed club treatment which was nearly sure to be conclusive.

But even to the home town boys, romance had its perils. Casual flirtations were discouraged by the

cold eyes of vigilant parents, plus the handy grapevine of gossip and the newspaper comments.

Moreover, there were the young ladies themselves to reckon with. They had at least two fads of the "ever thine" variety; the lock of hair in the breast pin, and the quilt of necktie pieces. Legitimately, these were bestowed as fond keepsakes, in return, perhaps for a hand-painted necktie executed by the girl herself; but fads are fads, and these came to be a measure of popularity, and no Apache warrior was ever prouder of his ‘collection of scalps than the girls with their hunks of hair and growing crazy quilts. Many a boy got home from a date to find himself with an unexpected bald spot, or a cherished part of his wardrobe missing.

And then, once he had become serious about a girl, and had escorted her to the various church suppers and festivals, and had taken her tobogganing down the coal shaft hill slide, it was considered recherche for him to serenade her.

To do this really in style he was to get a team of horses and a wagon. This latter had to be scrubbed out first and then four torchlights were fastened to the corners. Then he loaded an organ into it (the kind you pumped with your feet), collected a few friends with guitars and set out. Almost inevitably, the following night his male friends burlesqued his fervent efforts, and their caterwauling was in no wise calculated to increase his popularity with any of the villagers who wanted to sleep.

After that it was practically over but the wedding. These were more or less quiet affairs, for it had not yet become the custom to have attendants. It was the charivari, after the couple had returned from their honeymoon, that tore the top off the town. All the boys and a good many of the men, joined the celebration with anything that would produce a good, loud, substantial noise. Tin pans and horns were the favorites, and the size of the racket they produced supposedly corresponded with the popularity of the couple. It continued, too, until the happy bridegroom came out and stood treat for the crowd. It was fun for them, but it was purest broth of hell for the sick and sleepless, and it became such an outstanding nuisance that, at the turn of the century, the state legislature outlawed the custom.

Married and settled down, a respected and substantial citizen, it became his own turn to worry about a newer generation which seemed straight on the way to perdition. To offset the effects of the nightly fires, fist fights, wholesale drunkenness and assorted pranks, it took a steady nerve and strong right arm, for the creed of the day was that sparing of the rod was sure to spoil the child. In fact, the moral hazards were considered to be so great that one old gaffer testily remarked that the only way to successfully raise a boy was to put him in a barrel and feed him through the bunghole.

Information About Alma Lewis James

Alma Lewis-James, a distinguished penwoman and local historian of wide recognition, was born in Fairbury, Illinois on November 12, 1899. She died March 27, 1979.

She was a descendant of one of Fairbury's oldest families and a widely recognized local historian, she was the author of some thirty-four books, including the following:

Boney's Hired Man, 1951
Stuffed Clubs and Antimacassars, 1968
Stuffed Clubs and Antimacassars-revised,1977
The Ancestory and Posterity of Obil Beach
The Ancestory and Posterity of William Lewis

In recognition of the publication of her history of Fairbury, Governor Sam Shapiro proclaimed Friday, August 23, 1968 as Alma Lewis-James Day throughout the State of Illinois.

1993 Blade Reprint

The following was printed in the March 4, 1993 Blade:

100 Years Ago
The Blade, Saturday March 18, 1893

The Fairbury House, Paducah Avenue and Fourth street, has again changed hands and has now become the property of Fred Thomas of Lacon, he having purchased it of Mr. Hill. The house will be repainted, redecorated and renovated from top to bottom. Electric lights will be put in and next fall steam heat will take the place of stoves.

Jim Roberts Editorial

Standing on the corner... ...Just Whittlin'.. . .with The Blade

By Jim Roberts

Well, a couple or three weeks ago I tell you about the long-ago resident, "Peck" Franzen, who is both mayor and post-master of Fairbury at the same time while wearing the dirtiest shirt anybody ever sees and who is often mistaken by the hobos of that time as one of their own.

Now there is no reason for his appearance, as he owns a 240-acre farm, and when he dies they find all kinds of cash squirreled away in jars and cigar boxes and under the rug in his house.

So I suggest "Peck" has to be one of Fairbury's all-time characters, and I ask for other nominations.

Well, the nominating committee meets the other morning at the marble table in my office at the soda fountain of my friend, John The Pharmacist.

And I get such names as Pat Barham, who each spring takes his yearly bath out at the Munz sand-pit on

Indian Creek country club.

And Bertil Wormelsdorf, who Virg the Old Trooper claims each morning has a glass of beer and a sugar cookie for breakfast. "And he dunks that cookie in the beer, just like a doughnut!"

Virg also suggests "Peg-Leg" Jim, but can't remember Peg-Leg's last name, so we can't put him on the list.

And then The Captain suggests Lawrence Lovelock, who is not a city dweller like the first three, but who lives in the woods on the other side of the Vermilion river north of town. "He goes barefoot most of the time, even in the winter," The Captain goes on.

"You remember that song of 20 or 30 years ago, about the Battle of New Orleans, with the line 'They ran through the brambles and they ran through the bushes...?!

"Well, this Lawrence is a great guy to track rabbits and foxes and such, and when he gets on one, there he goes, barefoot through the snow and the brambles and the bushes, running after them. And in the spring, he is a great guy to be hunting arrowheads in the fields, which he also does barefoot.

"And when he'd sit, over there behind Si The Gas Guy's station, probably back when Van owns it, and Lawrence would chip out an arrowhead in hardly any time at all, and as good as any Indian ever makes."

Now those bushes and brambles where Lawrence Lovelock is cavorting are out there in Avoca township, where the first settlers around here located and a place where we'd all be living today if Octave Chanute hadn't come along surveying a railroad and missed that little community by about six miles, whereupon they all moved down here and started a new town.

But as usual, I digress.

(A fellow once says to me "I ask you what time it is and you tell me how to build a watch!")

Now the Captain mentioning Lawrence Lovelock brings to my mind another story I hear about this very area in which the Lovelock name plays a part.

Another resident of that area is one Tom Smith, who lives south and east of the County Bridge on North First street. One of the town's most respected citizens, a scholar, no less, tells me about Tom some years ago, and how his wife checks out of this world after presenting him with seven kids--four boys and three girls. The boys are meaner than dirt and the girls are beauties, he tells me. As Alma Lewis James says in two of her books, in those days Fairbury is a rough and tumble town, and Tom Smith is in the front row when it comes to rough and tumble.

My friend says that Tom mistreats the boys and they hate him and the hired man who helps raise them. And one Sunday morning, the hired man is missing; never see him again.

Meanwhile, the boys grow up, and one of the middle ones, John B., takes a shine to a Gilpin girl, who lives nearby. But she marries a Lovelock, possibly the uncle of Barefoot Lawrence.

But John B. Smith does not accept this, so my informant claims he buys the woman from her new

husband for $1,600, which in those days represents a 160-acre farm.

Meanwhile Percy James, the attorney buys the Tom Smith land and decides to replace an old shack with a new structure.

And when they dig the basement, or the footings, they find human remains, in a sitting position, with the skull bashed in.

My informant says no doubt it is the hired man.

Tom Smith, by the way, has a noble red granite monument, with John B.'s near, in the very northwest of Graceland cemetery, along Seventh Street.